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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUALA LUMPUR 000981

SIPDIS

FOR EAP/MTS AND S/SRMC PLEASE PASS TO FARAH PANDITH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/08/2019

TAGS: PREL PGOV MY

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR VISIT TO MALAYSIA BY SPECIAL
REPRESENTATIVE FOR MUSLIM COMMUNITIES FARAH PANDITH

Classified By: Political Counselor Brian D. McFeeters for reasons 1.4 b
and d.

Summary and Introduction

11. (C) Embassy Kuala Lumpur warmly welcomes your visit to Malaysia. U.S.-Malaysia relations are changing across a wide range of bilateral and multilateral settings. In his first eight months in office, Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak has demonstrated a more pragmatic and action-oriented approach than his predecessor. Najib has explicitly endorsed strengthened ties with the United States. The challenge is for Malaysia to translate his words into deeds in priority areas for us ranging from non-proliferation and contributions to the effort in Afghanistan, to combating trafficking in persons. Najib realizes Malaysia needs economic reforms to stay competitive so he is pushing for increased economic liberalization, but he faces the difficulty in separating fundamental economic reform from concomitant political loosening. Islamic influence in society is increasing at a discernible pace, but the scope and nature of change are less visible. There is clearly a divide between less conservative Muslims in urban areas and more conservative rural believers, but it is hard to gauge the consequences in a dynamic, modern economy like Malaysia's. The ruling party and its political opposition are led by ethnic Malays who view the world increasingly through the prism of Middle East politics, albeit barely understood and therefore a dimly-lit prism, and the influence of mainly Christian Eastern Malaysians as well as secular or Buddhist Chinese and Hindu or Muslim Indians is notable as well. In the wake of the President's Cairo speech, your visit provides an excellent opportunity to engage the Malaysian government and society on the increasingly salient topic of the struggle of devout Muslims who are contending with the forces of globalization in the 21st century world economy. END SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION.

The Broader Relationship in Context

12. (C) Robust trade and investment ties remain the solid foundation of our relationship with Malaysia, our 18th largest trading partner (bilateral trade totaled USD 44 billion in 2008). The GOM has been an important partner on counterterrorism when it serves Malaysia's own security interests, and we enjoy expanding law enforcement cooperation as well as evolving military-to-military ties. Our people-to-people ties build on decades of Malaysian students studying in America (6,000 Malaysian students studied in the U.S. during 2008-2009). The emergence of new administrations in both our countries has provided expanded opportunities to pursue vigorous public outreach to often-skeptical, but now more receptive, Muslim Malay audiences. Malaysian officials have expressed interest in playing a role in interfaith dialogue and may mention this interest to you.

¶13. (SBU) Embassy opposition and secular contacts are concerned about signs that Malaysia is drifting away from its historically moderate approach to Islam toward a more conservative, less tolerant approach both within the Islamic community and in relation to other religions. On the side favoring increased Islamic influence, both legally and politically, is a diffuse group: conservative Muslim clerics, Syariah lawyers and judges, state religious departments, some members of the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS), the People's Justice Party (PKR), and the ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and various Islamic NGOs including the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM).

¶14. (SBU) For example, after many years during which Syariah laws such as those forbidding Muslims from drinking were on the books in states but not enforced, these conservative elements are seen as backing the caning sentence of a Muslim woman, Kartika, for drinking beer at a hotel restaurant in Pahang state. Another example was the November arrest by religious authorities in the state of Selangor of a popular Islamic cleric, formerly Mufti (chief cleric) of the state of Perlis, known for his pluralist statements, for preaching Islam without a permit. Sisters in Islam, a 30-year-old NGO that has consistently spoken out for pluralist interpretations of Islam, equality for women under Islamic law, and against the dangers of ambiguous Syariah laws now feels under threat because conservative Islamic NGOs have lodged numerous police complaints against the organization, resulting in a police investigation. (Note: you will meet

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with leaders from the Sisters of Islam, an increasingly important Embassy contact, early during your visit. End Note.) Critics of this perceived "Islamic drift" see it happening under the nose of Prime Minister Najib, who, they say, lacks strong Islamic credentials, (unlike his predecessor Abdullah Badawi), moral authority, or strong interest (unlike former PM Mahathir, who kept conservative Islamic elements in check) in Islam.

¶15. (SBU) Although the movement for more conservative (but not radical) interpretation of Islam and more widespread application of Syariah law is largely an intra-Islam phenomenon, the ability to practice other religions freely -- a hallmark of Malaysia, where about 45 percent of the population is non-Muslim -- has also been affected, though still in ways that do not prevent the open pursuit of religious practice with the notable exception of Judaism. For example, the Cabinet and the National Fatwa Council ruled in 1986 and reiterated in 2006 that only Muslims could use the word "Allah", though it has long been used in Malay translations of the Bible. The government and the Fatwa Council claimed that the usage of the word "Allah" in Malay language bibles could confuse and anger Muslims. The GOM wants the Church to use the term "Tuhan", a generic Malay term for God or Lord, instead of "Allah." The decision has led the Home Ministry to reject a shipment of Malay language bibles in November because they included "Allah." There have also been complications when the husband in a marital dispute converts to Islam, leading to automatic conversion of the children and child custody for the father, an issue now being addressed. In other words, many of the issues Muslims elsewhere in Southeast Asia and in the Middle East are contending with are resonant here as well.

¶16. (SBU) The Embassy is strengthening its close working relationship with Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, chairman of the Cordoba Initiative, who promotes interfaith dialogue in Malaysia and elsewhere which attract leading Islamic figures from throughout the world. Kuala Lumpur was host recently to a historic gathering of over 200 dynamic Muslim women activists from around the world who had gathered in Kuala Lumpur for the Cordoba Initiative's Women's Islamic

Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (WISE) conference entitled "Muslim Women: Building Institutions, Creating Change" conference. WISE founder, and Imam Feisal's spouse, Daisy Khan, saw the conference as an opportunity to build on the change President Obama highlighted in his speech in Cairo. The goal of the conference was to build a network of Muslim women to challenge the distorted interpretations of Islam and increase the social-economic self-determination of Muslim women worldwide.

The Status of Women

¶7. (SBU) Another relevant issue is the status of women in Malaysia. Women's Minister Shahrizat Abdul Jalil has called for placing more women in decision-making positions. She has identified four major adversities facing women in Malaysia today: the repercussions of the recession; work-life balance; the gender gap; and violence against women. Shahrizat's Deputy, Chew Mei Fun, told the media on November 26 that women still faced discrimination in Malaysia and cited increasing domestic violence (3,769 reported incidents in 2008) and rape cases. Women, especially in the poorest states of Kelantan and Terengganu, face disproportionately high rates of poverty and lack access to health care. Despite these problems, women in Malaysia have made significant progress toward gender equality, not facing the kind of wholesale economic and social discrimination against women found in some predominantly Muslim countries. The GOM has ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and Malaysia's five-year development plans have included sections on the advancement of women. There are 23 women Members of Parliament, about 10 percent of the total (222), and 17 out of 68 Senators are women, while only two of 32 Cabinet Members are women. NGOs claim that women face de facto job and salary discrimination in Malaysia. Melanne Verveer, the Department's Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's issues, recently met with GOM officials and NGOs during a visit here from December 3-4 (septel).

KEITH